Brookline May 8. 1887

Neither do men put new wine into old bottles; else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish; but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved.

Matt 9. 17 —

This short parable was spoken ~~by way of~~ in answer to the complaint made against Jesus by friends of John the Baptist, that the disciples of the former did not observe the religious customs which the latter had enjoined upon his followers. The incident of which it forms a part throws no little light upon the relations between the Two great Teachers whose names then had something like equal prominence before the Jewish public.

It shows us that there was enough difference between the two, to induce the enemies of Jesus to seize the opportunity to weaken him by turning this difference into active hostility. They perceived a visible crack of disunion, and were not slow to insert a wedge which they hoped to drive home to entire separation. We know that on one occasion John sent a deputation to Jesus with a message of dissatisfaction. At that time Jesus dismissed the embassy with the simple request that they should report to John the works they had seen. Then, turning to his own disciples, ~~which~~ he ascribed to John equal rank with the greatest of the Prophets who had preceded him, but at the same time declared that the least in his new Kingdom of heaven was greater than the greatest of the old religious order. The Pharisees, knowing of some feeling of separation between the two leaders and their followers, which feeling doubtless deepened in many minds to jealousy and strong antagonism, adroitly undertook to use the name and authority of John to shake the loyalty of some of Christ's disciples. No doubt they succeeded, and this was perhaps one of the most effective of the means adopted by them to so far estrange the people from Jesus that they could safely arrest him and put him to death. It is equally plain that Jesus saw this peril, and so far as he honorably could sought to avoid it, but would not stoop to cover up the ~~[illegible]~~ disagreement of which his enemies made use against him. In answer to their implied charge that he was destroying the religious influence of John's work, by allowing his disciples to neglect the fasts which John had taught them to observe, Jesus only said that he was with his followers as a bridegroom among his friends, and they were in no fasting mood. He thus skillfully avoided the dispute about the religious efficacy of fasts in which his questioners hoped to entangle him. But at the same time he would not seem to cloak the fact that his movement was quite distinct in its purpose and aim from that of John. In a certain sense, his was a new religion, which must be allowed to express ~~himself~~ itself in new customs. He was not engaged in the folly of putting a patch upon an outworn garment when the stitches would not hold. He would have it understood that he had brought a new wine, which the old bottles were not strong enough to hold, and that the church which he had planted was entirely distinct from the religion of former days, whatever the two might have in common.

New bottles for new wine. A new home for the new thought. New customs for the new spirit. This Jesus insisted upon, without the least revolutionary contempt for that which had served its time in the past, but with clear knowledge that Christianity could come to nothing within the limits of the old dispensation, and must separate itself from that, as an entire new growth. What was the difference between Jesus and John, that made it impossible for the two to work together, and rendered some division of their labors imperative? You will not find it in any distinctive doctrine that either preached, so much as in the animating spirit of their respective ideas and aims. Both taught substantially the same truth about God and human duty; but one spoke this truth in warlike and aggressive manner, the other in accents of peace and love. Both used the same phrase, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," To John this meant the swift purging of the world from unrighteousness by fire and sword; to Jesus it meant the triumph in every heart of its heavenly over its base desires. All the thought of John was marked by a certain selfishness of disposition and aim. The glory of himself his friends and his nation was evermore before him as the prize of well doing. He seemed to seek God ~~as the~~ with some remnant of the fetish-worshipper's desire to get from Him ~~[illegible]~~ an advantage which the rest of mankind could not share. From the heart of Christ every last vestige of this vindictive self-seeking spirit had disappeared. John said to his Maker. "Lord here are enemies to Thee and to me. Let them be smitten and broken; and let thy friends be made great and mighty in the sight of all people." The prayer of Jesus was on the contrary. "Father forgive those who in blindness and ignorance transgress thy laws, and let all who would serve thee find their highest delight in assisting thy redeeming love." The new wine of Christ's gospel was this spirit of joyous self-sacrifice for truth and right, and it was this which could not be put into the old religious establishments. They were all keyed to the lower desire of human nature, which leads each one to seek first his own salvation, and the welfare of his kind only so far as that is the condition of his personal advancement or security. Even that spiritual movement which John had created, did not break through the narrow circle of self-regard and self-seeking. It was still the old dream of Jewish dominion and splendor, by which he was influenced, and not simply ~~of~~ a desire to see evil give place to good over all the earth. Jesus knew that no renovation or reform of existing religious institutions ~~the religion of his nation~~ could accomplish his thought of a divine kingdom in the human heart, while that spirit was left in them ~~it~~; and therefore he devoted himself to the foundation of a new church, to be the home of an utterly unselfish faith and life. ~~religion~~, How vain his hope was, if he thought to keep the old spirit of self seeking ~~o~~ wholly out of the society and brotherhood that owned his name, we know from history of the past, and from observation of this ~~our own time~~ present world. His Church became in time one of the great temporal powers; and in its seats of authority there was as much selfish ambition as could be found in the courts or councils of kings. The name of the Master, which should signify broadest faith in and love of goodness, is made a word to conjure with; a magical password by which some few out of earth's millions are to be admitted to heavenly joys; — But while the mass of Christians have been intent upon the [illegible] selfish scramble for salvation, the spirit of Christ has always lived, here and there, in the church that bears his name, and has been perpetuated down to this present day. He who reads human life deeply can see underneath the intellectual controversies that have divided Christendom, the striving of that holy love which Christ imparted to his followers, to [illegible] come in upon it like a flood, and uplift once

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016

https://archive.org/details/sermonbyharoldnb00brow_13

more in the sight of men. the pure standard of a heavenly life which Christ displayed.— We hear much of the progress of liberal thought, in all directions, and great things are expected from its advance. But it is not thought alone, of any stamp, that the world needs, ~~and~~ or is seeking to attain. A new theology which is only the more appropriate road by which certain fractions of humanity can travel heavenward, is of no such significance as that anybody should put forth much labor on its behalf.— To add one more shade to the already large assortment of philosophical colors, among which fastidious mortals may take their choice, is not an enterprise that demands great zeal or enthusiasm. But to take one more step toward disentangling the spirit of Christ from motives, aims and beliefs that hide and destroy its power; to help forward the one all important reform that Christ ~~inaugurated~~ ~~[illegible]~~ inaugurated; that viz. of substituting a love of goodness for a love of the selfish advantages which religion and Morality are supposed to purchase,- this is a work in which we may call upon our souls to put forth all their energy. The spirit which needs to be made supreme over all the affairs of life is old, in respect that it has been in the world not only since Christ's time, but since the beginning of man's history; for before the wonderful revelation of spiritual manhood given through him of Nazareth, there were many flashes, in word and deed, of the same divine light. But in comparison with the gross mental darkness through which that light is slowly breaking, its beams are always new. In each succeeding generation the line is once more drawn between that which needs to be put away as belonging to an an outgrown order, and that which needs to be brought in, as the beginning of a more divine life to succeed. In every case, it is a distinction, not so much between dogmas or beliefs of different patterns, as between a lower and a higher approximation to that unselfish passion for the glory of God and the good of man which flamed in the heart of Christ. I say again, that the so called new theology by itself means very little, The new spirit, so far as that has come into modern life, means everything. Your latest speculation concerning the nature of God and the destiny of the human soul is only of value as it serves to indicate or measure a growth of spiritual humanity which demands ~~the~~ some larger garments of belief in which to clothe itself. All forms of thought may be falsely used. There are dogmatists and popes in every communion, who have all the 'intolerant' temper of churchmen of the middle ages in urging their views upon their fellows. When the old spirit survives it makes little odds what is the shape or color of the theological creed which it swings as its cudgel. The thing is to have done with that spirit and to get something better in its place, let us view all the turmoil and unrest of the world about us, not as an endeavor to get merely new ideas in the place of old ones, but as an attempt to exorcise the old Demon of brutal selfishness; and an intuitive quest of the soul of man for some door of entrance to a life of heavenly peace; - For this is the true interpretation of the great upheaval and shaking of our religious edifice; And it is altogether beside the mark to plead rather that the old dogmas have great truths at their core, or that the new beliefs make a more consistent Philosophy. ~~core~~ The fact is that the Christianity of the masses is still little more to them than something which ministers to their private gain or ~~[illegible]~~ secures their individual salvation, and consciously or unconsciously, man must always be looking till he ~~finds~~ gains admission to that infinite love, where he for the first time finds his true life, in losing the thought of himself. ~~There are cheering~~

There are cheering signs that men are widely awaking to the true meaning of the hungers of their hearts, and are applying themselves to labor, as never before, for ~~the~~ some real bread of life; signs that our vintage is yielding us the genuine wine of a new spirit, which will abundantly recompense all our labor and pain. These signs we must read, and by them we must direct our action, if we would be of service to the spiritual interests of the society in which we live. — We must note for one thing, that great numbers of earnest men and women are now asking for proof and experience of living, vital faith in God; for something that they can feel as an inward certainty of the rule of Divine goodness. This signifies that a spirit is abroad which will not content itself with traditions and respectable postures of religion, but demands, if there be any real knowledge of God, that it shall know for itself what power controls its fate. It is a spirit which Christ, were he now alive would hail with joy. When he walked the earth, he encountered everywhere mere indifference to his offer to show men, so that they could see for themselves, that they were linked with a life of infinite goodness and love. He was as one offering food to a world which had not yet learned to be spiritually hungry, ~~and~~ but was for the most part entirely content with its hearsay evidence of divine things. It is not so content to-day. Only the relatively few are now satisfied to take the testimony of saints and prophets without evidence, in their ~~[illegible]~~ souls of the truth of religious ideas. The many have already a better spirit, ~~of desiring~~ and desire to possess in their own hearts some ~~little and~~ witness to the great faiths by which the noblest souls have been sustained. The heart and the flesh of humanity are beginning to cry out as never before for the living God. There is no more preposterous misjudgement of the signs of the time than that which supposes it to be growing indifferent toward those all-important questions of life's origin and destiny, upon the souls' answer to which so many lower questions turn. Nothing is more futile than to put aside faith in God as of small account, and then try to reach with quickening life the deep springs of human action. The indifference of the age is only felt, toward teachers and teachings which carry no weight of authority or conviction. In its inmost heart the life of our day is wrestling with the vast problems of existence in most desperate earnest, and craves nothing more intensely than a word which will strengthen its hope and faith. The man or the Church which aspires to be a power for good in the world must henceforth believe something, upon the warrant of his or its own experience; must speak to men, not merely of what great prophets have said, but of things which are to the living soul to-day sublime and inspiring realities. — This, for one particular, is a hint of the new spirit that is making itself felt in the world. It is a spirit that will not help us to build or maintain Churches on any precise form of doctrine, but which will have an unerring eye to distinguish between easy going profession of faith, and deep, strong possession of the rule of divine love and truth.

But ~~and~~ the clearest mark, undoubtedly, of the growth of Christ's own spirit in the general mind, is ~~the~~ its broadening sense ~~of~~ of the bonds of sympathy and obligation that bind all life together. The essential meanness of trying to save one's own soul, instead of working oneself to the utmost to save others; the ignoble selfishness of being content with a prospect of everlasting happiness for self, while multitudes are condemned to endless misery, is beginning to be strongly felt. It is of no special consequence to substitute a dogma of universal salvation in place of our former universal condemnation. What men believe about the future is a slight matter as compared with the question how they feel toward their fellow creatures whom they can influence for good or evil. Can they see their brothers borne down by a weight of woe, and still relish the full flavor of their ~~own~~ pleasures, or must they, in order to enjoy their own lot, try at least to seek and save them that are lost? In the hour of peril at sea we do not judge a man for his belief that the chances are against escape, but for his willingness to leave others to drown, if he can only provide for his ~~own~~ personal safety. We have no reason to complain of those who think and teach that the fortunes of humanity have been shipwrecked, though to our thought the world stands in no such forlorn ~~state~~ case. But when men and women who do believe that thousands are daily going to a fate infinitely worse than ~~a golden~~ eternal death, instead of giving their whole ~~[illegible]~~ time to the rescue of these unfortunates, live smiling and comfortable amidst this horror, ~~since they~~ caring only to remember that they have been made free of the curse, everybody can see that something is wrong in their heads. We will not condemn them for their doctrine, but if they truly believe it, then for them to know one moment's happiness while there is a chance that they are leaving some opportunity for the rescue of a human soul neglected, is, in this day simply infamous, as brutal and cruel as to make merry like that stony-hearted Roman emperor while shrieks of physical anguish and torture filled the air. It is swiftly becoming more and more impossible for men to count themselves religious or christian on such terms as these. The rise of a more humane spirit forbids them to think of a heaven for their own portion, from which they may look down in perfect bliss upon gulfs of torment stretched beneath them. The change that is being wrought in human nature is far more profound than any intellectual transformation. It is a change from the mental state in which men delighted to see the punishment of their enemies to one in which they can rejoice to see their most malignant foe delivered from his ~~suffering~~. It is a change from ~~that~~ old spirit of selfishness in religion, which made each soul intent upon its ~~own~~ private welfare here and hereafter; to that true Christ-like spirit which accepts pain and ~~suffering~~ hardship if only it can purchase relief for other souls.

In many ways not technically called religious we may note the growth of the better spirit. In the recognition of well-to-do classes that wealth has its duties as well as its privileges, and their willingness to be, like Christ, rejected of men, for the sake of conferring a benefit upon them, there is vast promise of future progress. Time was, and that not very long ago, when the last thought to enter the mind of the rich and the powerful was that they were in some sense stewards of a trust to be administered for the good of mankind. Then, when they began to recognize their obligations toward the weak and incompetent, the fact that the poor often met their proffers of sound advice with suspicion and hate, and that only the bribe of almsgiving won hearty tributes of praise, for a long while prevented charity from ~~it~~ doing its rightful ~~[illegible]~~ work. But now people are learning that the lowest ignorance always resents the attempt to enlighten it; that men do not want the true Gospel, but stone their prophets just as they have always done, and that the part of those who have help to give or truth to speak, is to submit to be stoned for the kingdom of heaven's sake. An interest in the welfare of the humblest and meanest of God's creatures is springing up in the better class of minds, which is ready to work through ~~[illegible]~~ misjudgment, and even through tempests of scorn to ransom souls from wretchedness and sin. This interest is something greatly more than enlightened selfishness. It is a growth of that holy love and compassion that filled Christ's heart, and people who are somewhat given to preaching a theory of morals which bases the noblest action upon such mean principles of what he can gain for himself through the public welfare, themselves disprove their theory by making sacrifices for which they can expect no other recompense than an approving conscience. Spite of the new promulgation of the old platonic idea that the feeble forms of humanity should be left to perish, the Christian sentiment of pitiful care for the unfortunate ~~the~~

has steadily increased, and the fact that strength and knowledge are so widely turning to deal with the problems of poverty and vice augurs great things for coming time. For next to that Divine Providence which holds us all in its keeping, the world is continually in the hands of those who rise to the top of the social scale. No revolution or mob-rule can, even then temporarily, take the reins of power out of their grasp. It is they who set fashions and give laws to society on lower levels. It is for them to shape the world's affairs by slow degrees toward ideal aims. The gifts of God are given them in larger measure not for their ease or profit alone, but that they may be guides and leaders of men in ~~their~~ the search for a nobler estate; and to behold Christ's spirit taking possession of their minds, is a sure promise that it shall at last conquer all mankind to its sway.

This then, the spirit of patient love and self sacrifice, is the new wine, which the vineyard of the Lord is being made to yield. We must count our spiritual gain, not in the coin of doctrine or belief alone, but in the far richer treasure of an increasing heavenly life, such as was made manifest in Christ. The growth of the Christian consciousness has been a constant reaching up to attain this life; and from time to time it has broken through old creeds and rituals, not merely to establish some new thought or theory, but to ~~attain~~ acquire a firmer grasp or to make a clearer expression of the gracious spirit, to which these eighteen centuries behind us, have worshipped as their divine ideal. Toward that, and no lower mark, we should be pressing forward. All lessons and discourses we should strive to translate for men into this truth; that the rule of kindness and equity in every heart is the one authority that can govern life to high aims and uses, and that the best any one can do, for himself or his fellows, is to see to it that his words and deeds add power to the spirit that is pure and peaceable and just.

And now let some few words be spoken concerning the new bottles in which this wine is to be stored. If we ~~have~~ have separated ourselves from the great body of the Church only to construct a theological cistern according to our own fancy, which there is no room of God's grace to fill, we deserve utter and miserable failure. But I trust we are building no such dry and empty shell. It is the office of institutions to gather up and apply, generation after generation, the forces, which, without a reservoir to draw them in, and pour them out again, tend to run largely to diffusion and waste. What a great University is to learning; a ~~good~~ storehouse, into which all that individual effort can acquire is drawn, and out of which rich streams of knowledge ceaselessly flow, that ~~a~~ the church should be & has been to the growth of man's spirit in the heavenly life. The power to fill such a center and home of spiritual activity is abroad in the world. Is there not need for a church, — I do not say that shall be abreast the thought of the age; but one that shall be abreast the finest humanity of the age; in which religion and morals shall be fused together into one far shining light, as they were in the soul of Christ; and which shall be be a readier instrument, alike for the most devout piety, and for works of widest helpfulness? I do not wish to speak or *even* to think uncharitably of those religious institutions which have been a mighty aid to the growth of man's spiritual nature. They who do not see or feel the debt of reverence due to those Christian influences which have gone into the blood and brain of earth's greatest benefactors, must read life with a very dim and superficial eye. But I do say that popular religion is now far behind the best life of the age, in that it still allows its heaven to be considered too much as the selfish prize of the individual soul, and erects its saints into a separate caste, instead of driving them out to enrich and redeem the life of sinful men. Even popular Christianity will catch at last the better spirit. But I am sure that this time offers no greater or fairer opportunity to do a most blessed work for the honor of God and the good of man, than to build a church whose doctrines and practices shall be more full of Christ's spirit of unselfish devotion to the common welfare of all souls. I would not have a church whose sole business it is to preach that God is going to save all mankind at last; I would have a church which knows that its own heaven cannot be made complete, till every sorrowing child of God is brought in from outer darkness and desolation, and which in pure ~~of~~ love of the work which Christ began, stands ready to labor, so long as God shall give it life.

for those whose hearts are starved and destitute. The foundations at least of such a church let us strive to lay; and may God grant ~~that~~ us wisdom and might so to build that our work can be used for the comfort and healing of our fellow men.—